A Philological and Exegetical Inquiry into the Allowability of "Depart Towards" in the Translation of Matthew 25:46: A Grammatical and Lexical Analysis

I. Introduction: The Philological parameters of the Query

The task of translating the New Testament from Koine Greek into English is an exercise in navigating the tension between semantic precision and the fluidity of the target language. The verse in question, Matthew 25:46, stands as the capstone of the Olivet Discourse, presenting a scene of final judgment that has exercised the minds of theologians for two millennia. However, the scope of this inquiry is rigorously restricted to the domain of philology—the study of language in written historical sources. We are tasked with determining whether the Greek grammar and vocabulary allow for a specific rendering: *"And these shall depart towards everlasting punishment: but the righteous towards life eternal."*

This proposed translation diverges from the traditional English rendering—"go away into"—by employing the phrase "depart towards." This shift, while seemingly subtle, fundamentally alters the spatial and aspectual relationship between the subject and the destination. "Into" suggests entrance, enclosure, and a finalized state of location. "Towards" suggests orientation, trajectory, and a movement relative to a goal without explicitly necessitating the completion of entry. To adjudicate the validity of this translation, one must dissect the verse not as a theological proof-text, but as a grammatical construct composed of specific morphemes, syntactical relationships, and lexical histories.

The verse in the Nestle-Aland Greek text reads:
καὶ ἀπελεύσονται οὗτοι εἰς κόλασιν αἰώνιον, οἱ δὲ δίκαιοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
(Kai apeleusontai houtoi eis kolasin aionion, hoi de dikaioi eis zoen aionion.)
Our investigation will proceed through four distinct yet interlocking philological layers. First, we must analyze the verb of motion, *apeleusontai* (from *aperchomai*), to understand the nature of the action initiated. Second, and most critically, we must subject the preposition *eis* to an exhaustive syntactical analysis to determine if its semantic range in the first century AD encompasses the directional "towards" as distinct from the locative "into." Third, we must evaluate the destination nouns, particularly *kolasin*, to see if their lexical roots (specifically the agricultural metaphor of pruning) support a translation that implies a process (towards which one moves) rather than a static state. Finally, we will synthesize these findings to determine if

the proposed translation satisfies the strict requirements of Greek parallelism and syntax.

II. The Verbal Action: The Morphology and Semantics of *Aperchomai*

The engine of the sentence in Matthew 25:46 is the verb *apeleusontai* (ἀπελεύσονται). To validate the translation "depart," one must establish that this verb carries the specific semantic weight of separation and withdrawal, rather than a generic notion of movement.

2.1 Morphology and Etymology

The form *apeleusontai* is the Future Middle (Deponent) Indicative, Third Person Plural of the verb *aperchomai* (ἀπέρχομαι).[1] This verb is a compound word, formed by the fusion of the preposition *apo* (ἀπό) and the verb *erchomai* (ἔρχομαι).

The root verb *erchomai* is the fundamental Greek verb for coming or going. It is semantically neutral regarding the specific nature of the motion (arrival vs. departure), relying heavily on prepositions or context to define the vector of movement.[2] However, the prefix *apo* acts as a decisive modifier. In Greek prepositional compounds, *apo* denotes separation, distance, or motion away from a point of origin. It is the linguistic opposite of *pros* (towards) or *sun* (with). Therefore, *aperchomai* literally signifies "to come away from" or "to go away from."

The translation "depart" is etymologically precise because "depart" (from the Latin *de-partire*) similarly emphasizes the act of separation or dividing oneself from a location. The King James Version (KJV), widely regarded for its attention to the *Textus Receptus*, translates *aperchomai* as "depart" in 27 instances and "go away" in 14 instances.[3] This statistical usage confirms that "depart" is not merely an allowable gloss but a primary definition within the New Testament corpus.

2.2 The Deponent Aspect and Future Indicative

The grammatical form is the Future Middle Indicative. *Erchomai* and its compounds function as deponents in the future tense, meaning they use middle/passive forms (*eleusomai*) but retain active meanings. The use of the Indicative mood asserts the action as a statement of fact: "they *will* depart."

The philological significance of this verb in Matthew 25:46 is its connection to the command given in verse 41: "Depart from me, you cursed" (*Poreuesthe ap' emou*). While verse 41 uses *poreuomai* (to traverse/go), verse 46 uses *aperchomai*. The shift to *aperchomai* in the narrative conclusion reinforces the finality of the separation initiated in the command. The subjects are not merely "going"; they are undergoing a spatial removal from the presence of the Son of Man.

2.3 Syntactical Construction with Verbs of Motion

In Koine Greek, verbs of motion like *aperchomai* trigger a predictable syntactical pattern involving prepositions to define the trajectory of the movement. The three most common constructions are:

1. **Motion From:** *Apo* + Genitive (Source).
2. **Motion Through:** *Dia* + Genitive (Trajectory).
3. **Motion To/Toward:** *Eis* or *Pros* + Accusative (Destination/Goal).

Matthew 25:46 utilizes the *eis* + Accusative construction. The user's query translates the verb *aperchomai* as "depart," which accounts for the separative force of the *apo-* prefix. The query then translates the preposition *eis* as "towards," which addresses the destination vector. The grammatical compatibility of "depart" (separation) and "towards" (direction) is high; one departs *from* a source *towards* a destination. Thus, strictly regarding the verb, the proposed translation "And these shall depart" is philologically impeccable.[1]

III. The Syntactical Pivot: The Preposition *Eis* and the Case for Directionality

The crux of the inquiry rests on the translation of the preposition *eis* (εἰς) as "towards" rather than the traditional "into." This single word serves as the syntactical bridge between the subjects and their fate. To determine if "towards" is allowable, we must conduct a deep dive into the history, semantic range, and grammatical function of *eis*.

3.1 Historical Evolution and the Accusative of Extension

The preposition *eis* evolved from the older form *en-s*, which is essentially the preposition *en* (in) combined with the sigma of the accusative case.[5] This etymology reveals a fundamental connection between *en* and *eis*, yet their divergence in usage is stark in the classical and Koine periods.

- **En (ἐν) + Dative:** Denotes a static position, rest, or location *within* boundaries. It answers the question "where?".[6]
- **Eis (εἰς) + Accusative:** Denotes motion, extension, and direction. It answers the question "whither?" or "to where?".[8]

The Accusative case, which *eis* exclusively governs, is inherently the case of *extension*. It describes the limitation of verbal action. When a verb of motion is modified by an accusative preposition, the primary grammatical assertion is that the motion extends *to* that limit. Whether the motion penetrates the limit (entering inside) or merely reaches it (arriving at) is often determined by context rather than the preposition itself.

Scholar Daniel Wallace, in *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, categorizes the uses of *eis* with

the accusative. While the "Spatial" use meaning "into, toward, in" is primary, the "Purpose" and "Reference" uses also exist.[5] Crucially, the lexicon definitions provided by Thayer, BDAG, and Strongs all include "toward" or "towards" as a primary definition alongside "into".[8] Strong's explicitly defines *eis* as denoting "entrance into, or *direction* and limit: into, to, *toward*, for, among".[9]

3.2 The Semantic Range: "Into" vs. "Towards"

The debate between translating *eis* as "into" versus "towards" is a debate between emphasizing the *result* of the motion versus the *direction* of the motion.

- **The Argument for "Into":** In many narrative contexts, *eis* clearly implies entry. When Jesus goes *eis* a house (Mark 2:1), he is inside it. When water is cast *eis* the sea, it mingles with it. This creates a strong precedent for *eis* acting as a container-entry marker.
- **The Argument for "Towards":** However, *eis* frequently appears in contexts where "into" is impossible or awkward, and "towards" or "unto" is required.
    - **Matthew 21:1:** "When they drew nigh unto Jerusalem, and were come *eis* Bethphage." They had not yet entered Jerusalem; they were moving *towards* it or had arrived *at* its outskirts.
    - **John 11:31:** She goes *eis* the grave. Mary was going *towards* the tomb to weep, not necessarily to enter the burial chamber itself at that moment.
    - **Acts 2:38:** "Baptized *eis* the remission of sins." A major theological debate exists here, but many scholars argue this *eis* indicates direction or reference ("with a view towards"), rather than a literal entry into a "container" of remission.[11]

In classical Greek, the preposition *pros* with the accusative was the standard way to express "towards" (direction without necessary entry).[15] However, by the Koine period (the dialect of the New Testament), the distinct boundaries between prepositions had begun to blur. *Eis* began to encroach upon the semantic territory of *pros*. This phenomenon is well-documented by Murray J. Harris in *Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament*.[16] Consequently, *eis* in the New Testament can function as a marker of direction (*pros*) just as validly as a marker of entrance.

3.3 The "Towards" Translation in Grammatical Context

If eis allows for "towards," does the grammar of Matthew 25:46 specifically support it?
The sentence structure is: Verb of Motion (apeleusontai) -> Subject (houtoi) -> Preposition (eis) -> Goal (kolasin).
Grammatically, this is a linear trajectory. The subject originates from the judgment seat (implied by *apo* in *apeleusontai*) and extends their movement *eis* the goal. Translating this as "depart towards" highlights the *vector* of the departure. It focuses on the orientation of the wicked as they leave the presence of the King. They are "homing in" on punishment.

This distinction is subtle but profound. "Depart into" collapses the journey and the arrival into a single concept of finality. "Depart towards" retains the dynamic tension of the movement. It implies a trajectory that leads inevitably to the destination, but the linguistic focus remains on the *movement* relative to the goal. Since the Accusative is the case of extension, emphasizing the *extension* of the journey via "towards" is strictly grammatically allowable.

3.4 Evidence from Comparative Prepositions

To further validate the "towards" possibility, we must compare *eis* with other prepositions used in similar contexts:

- **Pros (πρός):** Means "towards" or "facing." If Matthew had used *pros*, the translation "towards" would be mandatory. The use of *eis* suggests that "towards" is a permissible gloss, but perhaps "into" was the stronger intent. However, because *eis* overlaps with *pros* in Koine, "towards" cannot be ruled out as an error.[18]
- **Epi (ἐπί):** Can mean "onto" or "towards."
- **En (ἐν):** Means "in." Matthew did *not* use *en*. He did not say "they shall be *in* punishment." He used a verb of motion and a preposition of direction.

Therefore, the user's proposed translation "towards" is a valid exploitation of the directional overlap between *eis* and *pros* in the Koine period. It respects the motion inherent in the accusative case and the separative nature of the verb.

Table 1: Semantic Overlap of *Eis* and *Pros* in Koine Greek

Preposition	Primary Classical Meaning	Koine Usage Shift	Translation Options in Matt 25:46
Eis (εἰς)	Into (Entry/Penetration)	Absorbs "Towards" / Purpose	Into, Unto, **Towards**, For
Pros (πρός)	Towards (Direction/Facing)	Remains Directional	Towards, To, With
En (ἐν)	In (Static Location)	Occasionally absorbs "Into"	In, Among, At

Data Source: Synthesized from BDAG, Wallace [10], and Harris.[16]

IV. The Destination: Lexical Analysis of *Kolasin*

(Punishment vs. Correction)

The translation "depart towards" suggests a movement toward a process or a destination. The nature of that destination—*kolasin aionion*—is pivotal. The user translates *kolasin* as "punishment," which is the standard rendering. However, investigating the lexical roots of *kolasin* provides additional support for a directional ("towards") reading over a static locative ("into").

4.1 Etymology: The Horticulture of Judgment

The word *kolasin* is the accusative singular of *kolasis* (κόλασις). It derives from the verb *kolazo* (κολάζω).

- **Root Meaning:** To dock, prune, clip, or curtail.
- **Original Context:** The term was originally explicitly agricultural, referring to the pruning of trees to check the growth of branches, thereby improving the health and fruitfulness of the plant.[19]

This etymology is linguistically significant. Pruning is a *process* applied to a living thing for a specific *end* (restoration/growth). If the etymological nuance persists in the noun *kolasis*, then the "punishment" described is not a static chamber of torture ("into"), but an active administration of correction ("towards").

4.2 The Classical Distinction: *Kolasis* vs. *Timoria*

In Classical Greek philosophy, a sharp distinction was drawn between *kolasis* and *timoria* (τιμωρία).

- **Kolasis:** Discipline or correction inflicted for the benefit of the offender. Aristotle (*Rhetoric* 1.10.17) and Plato (*Protagoras* 324) explicitly define *kolasis* as remedial, intended to cure the wrongdoer.[20]
- **Timoria:** Retribution or vengeance inflicted for the satisfaction of the punisher and the vindication of justice.[23]

The user's query retains the word "punishment," but the choice of "towards" aligns sympathetically with the classical definition of *kolasis*. One moves *towards* a course of correction (a process) more naturally than one moves *into* a static abstraction of "correction." While "into correction" is valid English, "towards correction" or "towards discipline" emphasizes the teleological aspect—the movement is directed *at* the goal of rectification.

4.3 Koine Usage and the Septuagint

Critics of the "correction" view argue that by the time of the New Testament (Koine period), the distinction between *kolasis* and *timoria* had collapsed, and *kolasis* simply meant generic punishment.[25]

- **LXX Usage:** In Ezekiel (14:3, 18:30, 44:12), *kolasis* translates Hebrew terms for "stumbling block" or "punishment of iniquity".[21] In some contexts, it leads to death, which complicates the "remedial" view if death is seen as final.
- **New Testament Usage:** The noun appears only twice: Matt 25:46 and 1 John 4:18 ("fear has *kolasin*"). The verb *kolazo* appears in Acts 4:21 and 2 Peter 2:9.

Despite the debate on whether the punishment is remedial or retributive, the grammatical point stands: *kolasin* is an abstract noun in the accusative. Translating the preposition *eis* as "towards" maintains the accusative focus on the object of the motion. Whether that object is retributive torture or remedial pruning, the grammar allows the subjects to be described as moving *towards* it.

V. The Adjectival Modifier: *Aionion* and the Scope of the Movement

The adjective *aionion* (αἰώνιον) modifies both *kolasin* and *zoen*. The user's query translates this as "everlasting" for punishment and "eternal" for life. While the focus of this report is on the "depart towards" construction, the translation of *aionion* impacts the coherence of the sentence.

5.1 Lexical Range: Age-During vs. Eternal

Aionion is derived from *aion* (age/eon). Its literal meaning is "pertaining to an age" or "age-during".[28]

- **Quantitative View:** It means "endless" or "eternal" when applied to God or the life of the age to come. This is the traditional view supporting "everlasting punishment".[25]
- **Qualitative View:** It describes the *quality* of the age to come, not necessarily its duration. Thus, "punishment of the Age" and "life of the Age".[19]

The user's query proposes "everlasting" for the first instance and "eternal" for the second.

- *Eis kolasin aionion* -> Towards **everlasting** punishment.
- *Eis zoen aionion* -> Towards life **eternal**.

This variation in English ("everlasting" vs. "eternal") for the same Greek word (*aionion*) is stylistically permissible but philologically loose. However, it does not violate grammar. The question of allowability asks if the vocabulary *permits* it. Since *aionion* can mean "eternal" (and "everlasting" is a synonym), this is allowed.

5.2 The Interaction with "Towards"

If the translation "towards" is adopted, *aionion* acts as the descriptor of the destination.

- "Depart towards [the] everlasting punishment."

- "Depart towards [the] life eternal."

This construction works grammatically. The adjective binds to the noun in the accusative case, matching it in gender, number, and case. The preposition *eis* governs the entire noun phrase (*kolasin aionion*). The directional force of *eis* (towards) applies to the entire concept of "everlasting punishment."

VI. Syntactical Synthesis and Parallelism

The most powerful grammatical feature of Matthew 25:46 is its strict antithetic parallelism.

- Clause A: *kai apeleusontai houtoi eis kolasin aionion*
- Clause B: *hoi de dikaioi eis zoen aionion*

6.1 The Necessity of Consistency

Parallelism dictates that the grammatical function of elements in Clause A mirrors those in Clause B.

- Subject (These) <-> Subject (Righteous)
- Verb (Depart - implied) <-> Verb (Depart/Go - implied/ellipsed)
- Preposition (*Eis*) <-> Preposition (*Eis*)
- Noun (*Kolasin*) <-> Noun (*Zoen*)
- Adjective (*Aionion*) <-> Adjective (*Aionion*)

The user's query translates Clause A as "depart towards" and Clause B as "towards." This maintains the required parallelism. If *eis* means "towards" for the wicked, it must mean "towards" for the righteous.

6.2 The Theological Implication of "Towards Life"

Applying "towards" to the righteous ("but the righteous towards life eternal") introduces a nuance of *progression* into the concept of eternal life. Rather than "entering" eternal life as a static room, the righteous "depart towards" it. This aligns with dynamic concepts of *zoen aionion* as an ever-growing relationship with the Divine, rather than a static arrival. Linguistically, *eis* + Accusative allows for this dynamic interpretation. The righteous are set on a trajectory *into* the depths of eternal life.

6.3 Allowability Verdict

Is the translation "towards" allowable?
Yes.

1. **Vocabulary:** *Aperchomai* allows "depart." *Eis* allows "towards." *Kolasin* allows "punishment." *Aionion* allows "everlasting/eternal."
2. **Grammar:** The Accusative case supports the idea of extension and direction. The syntax of motion supports a directional preposition.

3. **Parallelism:** The translation applies "towards" consistently to both sides of the parallel structure.

While "into" is the standard translation because it implies the *result* of the motion (arrival), "towards" is the linguistically accurate translation of the *direction* of the motion. Greek prepositions often carry both meanings simultaneously (motion-towards-and-into). English forces a choice between the vector ("towards") and the result ("into"). Choosing the vector is a valid translational decision.

VII. Comparative Analysis of Translation Options

To contextualize the "towards" translation, we can compare it with data from various translation theories and existing literal versions.

Translation Strategy	**Rendering of Eis**	**Grammatical Focus**	**Theological Implication**
Traditional (KJV, NASB, ESV)	"Into"	Resultative / Locative	Final state of being inside punishment/life.
Strict Literal (YLT)	"To"	Neutral Directional	Ambiguous between arrival and direction.
Rotherham's Emphasized	"Into"	Telic / Locative	Entry into a sphere of correction.
Concordant Literal	"Into"	Spatial	Movement into a state.
Proposed User Translation	**"Towards"**	**Directional / Orientational**	**Trajectory and destiny; dynamic movement.**

Data Source: Comparison of Bible versions.[29]

The "towards" translation is less common not because it is grammatically incorrect, but because English usage often prefers "into" with abstract nouns like "punishment" to signify subjection to them. However, "towards" remains semantically overlapping with *eis* in the Koine

period.[5]

VIII. Conclusion: The Verdict on Allowability

Based strictly on the lexical and grammatical constructs of Koine Greek, the translation:
"And these shall depart towards everlasting punishment: but the righteous towards life eternal"
is grammatically and lexically allowable.

Summary of Evidence

1. **Verb (*Aperchomai*):** The semantics of *apo* (separation) fully support "depart" as a translation.[1]
2. **Preposition (*Eis*):** The semantic range of *eis* explicitly includes "towards" or "direction toward".[8] The blurring of *eis* and *pros* in Koine Greek further validates a directional gloss.[5]
3. **Noun (*Kolasin*):** While "punishment" is the standard gloss, the etymological background of "correction/pruning" makes a directional preposition ("towards correction") conceptually coherent, though the user's "towards punishment" is also syntactically valid.[20]
4. **Adjective (*Aionion*):** "Everlasting" and "Eternal" are valid glosses, though using different English words for the same Greek word obscures the parallelism. "Age-during" is the literal root meaning, but "everlasting" is within the accepted lexical range for NT theology.[25]
5. **Syntax:** The translation maintains the required parallelism between the fate of the wicked and the righteous.

Final Note on Nuance

Adopting "towards" shifts the aspect of the verse from a *static snapshot* of the final state to a *dynamic description* of the separation event. It focuses on the orientation of the souls as they leave the judgment seat. While distinct from the traditional "into," it violates no rule of Greek grammar and faithfully represents one of the primary definitions of the preposition *eis*. Thus, the translation is a legitimate, albeit nuanced, representation of the Greek text.

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